

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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# The Genuine, Original Wild Goose Chase

**"A**ny hunter who tests his skill in concealment and deception against the Canada goose during a hunting season develops a great respect for the wise old bird."

So wrote a game biologist in the *Game Bulletin* in 1951. "Biologists for the Department of Game, after two years of banding on the nesting islands of the Columbia River," he continued, "can further testify that a goose always has one more trick than anyone else."

It's often related that there's nothing so tough as "belling the cat," but "banding the goose" probably runs a close second, at least in the opinion of many wildlife biologists.

Game Department biologists of all stripes rapidly gain "hands-on" experience in the field, and with geese, as with many other species, getting your hands on them isn't as easy as it may seem to outsiders. The technique of banding the legs of various wildlife species, particularly game birds, has been around for a long while, but waterfowl banding in a big way goes back to about 1947. That's when the states and provinces in the Pacific Flyway — a major skyway route taken by migratory waterfowl — decided there was a need for additional information on waterfowl traffic patterns. Wildlife managers badly needed the information to maintain waterfowl populations and to be able to recommend the proper hunting seasons to assure good hunting for future waterfowlers.

The states got together and formed the Pacific Flyway investigations group so that each state within the group could profit from the pool of information gathered by them all. One of the major efforts of this waterfowl study involved banding. Until then, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had carried on just

enough banding studies to establish the major flyway routes that waterfowl followed in their summer and winter migrations from the far north.

It was obvious to biologists, however, that a lot more work needed to be done to better enable wildlife managers to set the best possible hunting season dates and to find out what waterfowl migrations were taking place within the individual states.

The first big attempt to band great numbers of geese in Washington took place in 1950, and we can only regret that someone didn't capture it on film. It probably would have made for some great slapstick comedy. When do you band a goose, you ask? Well, according to the *Game Bulletin* . . .

Migratory waterfowl differ from other birds in that all their flight feathers are replaced at one time, leaving them flightless for approximately two to three weeks following the nesting period. It is at this time of theoretical helplessness that the biologists test their stamina and skill against that of the goose in an effort to leg band as many of the Columbia River nesting population as possible.

Note the word "theoretical." Just how theoretical this helplessness was became apparent to the hardy crew that tackled that first big banding effort. The encounter took place on islands used for nesting by Canada geese, mostly in the Columbia River near Hanford, inside the restricted area around the atomic reservation.

In late June, Game Department crews, joined by employees of the Hanford nuclear complex and some U.S. Fish and Wildlife workers gathered at Richland to map their battle strategy. The scene of the confrontation included nesting areas

in the Columbia above Richland that were estimated to contain about 1,000 young and adult geese.

**A**ccording to biologists, two methods of capture are generally accepted in banding of waterfowl, but neither one guarantees success. The "freebanding" method used in later years calls for the use of boats to drive flocks of flightless (it's molting time, remember) geese ashore or to approach loafing or feeding geese from the water. Once ashore, the birds are surrounded and captured in salmon nets, and single birds are chased down on foot.

Another capture technique, and the one that was tried in the early years, calls for driving geese into funnel-shaped traps made of poultry netting. Up to 200 geese have been captured in a single trapping drive using the poultry nets, but the method has proved to be applicable in only a few situations.

In that first banding blitz in 1950, when the dust and feathers had finally settled, 161 adults and young had been caught, banded and released. Building on their success, the intrepid goose banders met again the following year. Hopes were high that with a year's experience behind them, capture methods would be improved and a more seasoned crew could better the first year's banding tally.

That first year, great numbers of geese had completely outmaneuvered their would-be captors at a spot opposite the old townsite of White Bluff. A rocky outreach of land extended into the river there, and this was where the geese were driven ashore. When the capture crew clambered onto the rocks in hopes of snatching the geese, their elusive prey was making a mad dash for the opposite side of the peninsula and the safety of open water. Those geese made the quarter-mile dash in record time and reached the river on the other side before their pursuers could so much as grab a feather.

Learning from their mistakes, or so they thought, the banding crews in 1951 built a very wide trap with long, funneling, wing-like sides on the rocky outcrop of land where the geese had made their dash to safety the year before. Then the men began the sweeping operation intended to drive the geese onto the shore at the right spot. But the geese wouldn't cooperate. Probably because there was less water running in the channel near the peninsula than a year previously, the

geese resisted all efforts to drive them ashore. As reported in the *Game Bulletin* that year:

The sweat and toil required to build the trap only served to further prove the fallacy of believing that a goose can be outwitted. Low water proved to be a handicap throughout the operation, as more islands and rocks were exposed, giving the geese more areas in which to hide and making shorelines much more hazardous to approach.

Even though the second year's efforts included all the territory covered the previous June, as well as river nesting areas up to 65 miles below Richland, the final score of young and adult geese banded was heavily in favor of the geese. A total of 154 geese had been banded during the entire operation by the leg-weary and shin-skinned biologists. According to the *Game Bulletin*:

There was no evidence that less nesting geese were present this year. It is felt that the low score may be blamed only on the elements which were more in favor of the goose this year, and on the Canada goose itself — it just won't cooperate.

Historical records indicate that breeding pairs of geese, as opposed to migrating geese, were somewhat rare along the Columbia and Snake rivers until about the turn of the last century. This is to be expected, because the area's native grasses would have provided poor forage before the introduction of farm crops such as hay, wheat or other cereal grains.

Before the railroad lines were completed in 1908, rivers were the main way for travelers to make their way west, and nesting birds may have been overharvested. Breeding goose populations appear to have spread up the Palouse River from the Snake in the early 1900s, and then from the Palouse to the adjacent waters. Goose populations in the early part of the century probably weren't helped by the high numbers of homesteaders, lack of game laws and overgrazing of the grasslands.

**D**ucks were the primary objects of study in the Pacific Flyway waterfowl investigations, and they must have proved a whole lot easier to band than geese, since accounts printed in the *Game Bulletin* in 1952 showed that 10,873 ducks and geese had been banded since 1947. The banding had taken place at the state's four major waterfowl areas — the Skagit Delta, Grays Harbor, Potholes and lower Yakima River re-



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gions. With a seven-percent return of bands at the time of the report, it was already apparent that most eastern Washington ducks were produced in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The study of waterfowl movements is a fascinating one, and the migration paths of ducks and geese often seem erratic and mysterious. The 1952 magazine account of some of the stranger flights went this way:

... a mallard banded in the Skagit area was returned a year later from Peoria, Illinois; a pintail, banded in the Skagit on February 9, 1949, was recovered at Foxhome, Minnesota, on October 11, 1949; another pintail banded in Grays Harbor was recovered just 17 days later in Independence, Kansas; a green-winged teal banded on the lower Yakima River November 26, 1948, was recovered October 9, 1949, at Swan Lake, Minnesota. ... A pintail from the Skagit was recovered 53 days later near Gueydan, Louisiana. Ducks banded in Washington have been recovered from as far south as Mexico and as far north as the Bering Sea and Alaska.

Game Department biologists have learned much about the migrations of waterfowl since those early days, and bands have been returned from practi-

cally everywhere in the Western Hemisphere. It hasn't always been an easy job, as those goose-banders of 30 years ago would testify, and probably one of the most unusual cases that ever frustrated biologists studying a waterfowl flyway occurred in South America. It was reported in the *Game Bulletin*, so it must be true, and it concerned the stubborn inhabitants of a small, remote Indian village in Columbia.

The natives here have collected quite a pile of waterfowl bands, removed from birds which had been taken for food. Considered sacred by the Indians, no one is permitted to handle the bands and the fuming biologists have had no success to date in their attempts to record the numbers which might give them another clue in the mysteries of waterfowl migration.

The healthy populations of geese and ducks that our waterfowl observers and hunters enjoy today are due in large measure to the determined biologists who took part in that first, genuine wild-geese chase. They've been joined in the chase by many other researchers, wildlife managers and dedicated sportsmen who will carry on as long as the need exists. □

Game Department photo

